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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001730

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY INTERNAL BATTLE LINES
DRAWN UP WITH PRESIDENT'S RETURN

REF: A. COLOMBO 1672

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1639

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) With the September 27 return of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga from abroad, the internal battle lines within the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) are hardening, with the first major confrontation--the contents of the party manifesto--likely to occur during the Central Committee meeting scheduled for September 30. The President, who has reportedly already drafted the manifesto and wants its speedy approval, is expected to use the document to force her errant presidential candidate, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, to backtrack on the nationalist hard line endorsed in his electoral pacts with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumayu (JHU) (Reftels). Kumaratunga has already made several public statements--including an address before the Asia Society in New York that stressed federalism as part of the solution to the ethnic conflict--that directly contradict the positions espoused in the pacts.

[1](#)2. (U) The local press, meanwhile, has been full of reports of confrontations and flare-ups between the President and the Prime Minister and his camp since her return. According to one unconfirmed report, the Prime Minister threatened to walk out of a September 29 Cabinet meeting in which the President raised the contradictions between the positions espoused by the Prime Minister in the JVP and JHU agreements and SLFP policies. In an apparent back-handed slap at the President's efforts to rein him in, the PM has appointed outspoken JVP propagandist and Kumaratunga foe Wimal Weerawansa as official co-spokesman (along with pro-JVP Ports Minister Mangala Samaraweera) of his presidential campaign. Another front-page article highlighted the President's call at a September 29 public ceremony attended by the Prime Minister for the PM not to abandon educational reform efforts--as he his electoral pact with the JVP implicitly threatens to--begun during her administration.

[1](#)3. (C) Nirupama Rajapakse, a cousin of the PM and former SLFP MP, told poloff that relations between the President and Prime Minister have always been "very bitter," but are worse than ever now. The President has long regarded the Rajapakse family, which has had SLFP Members in Parliament for as long as the Bandaranaike clan, as the only real rival to her family's dynastic grip on the party, Rajapakse said. Kumaratunga thus sees the Prime Minister's candidacy as a lose-lose situation for her, Rajapakse suggested. If he wins, the Rajapakse position in the party is strengthened at the Bandaranaike's expense; if he loses, the party (the leadership of which Kumaratunga wants to pass on to her son Vimukthi, now a 27-year-old veterinary student) as a whole is weakened. (Note: Besides three sons of his own for whom he nurses similar ambitions of political ascendancy, the Prime Minister, like the President, has a brother who is an MP.)

[1](#)4. (C) The Prime Minister's gratuitous decision to defy the President by signing electoral pacts with the JHU and JVP--especially when he did not need to do so to gain their support--had only exacerbated tensions, Rajapakse observed. "It was very foolish of him," she commented. When asked why he chose to sign the pacts, Rajapakse replied that he had calculated that it was more important to snag JVP votes--and pre-empt any possibility of them running a candidate--than to woo minority voters. In the PM's view, the minorities would never vote for him anyway, she explained. On the other hand, the SLFP, which is organizationally weak at the grass roots level compared to the opposition United National Party (UNP), has lost many supporters to the JVP in the south, and the PM believes he needs the JVP's organizational abilities to help him win against the UNP. When asked if the PM truly believes the anti-peace process positions he espoused in the JVP and JHU agreements, Rajapakse responded, "Who knows? He will never say what he believes."

[1](#)5. (C) Rajapakse agreed that the election was likely to be extremely close--perhaps separated by just a few hundred thousand votes--and thus the President's apparent decision so far not to campaign for the SLFP candidate (she is scheduled to leave the country soon once again--this time to Paris) is

likely to hurt the PM. "It is also strange of the brother (Foreign Minister Anura Bandaranaike, who is still overseas) to stay away" during the campaign, she noted. The pair's behavior is fueling renewed speculation that the President may scuttle the PM's chances by dissolving Parliament--perhaps just days before the election. Besides her brother, the President can count on the support of "very few" SLFP'ers," according to Rajapakse--primarily Buddhist Affairs Minister Ratnasiri Wickremenayake, Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama, Deputy Information Minister Dilan Perera and Deputy Power Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage.

16. (C) Comment: We have been hearing the same rumor about the dissolution of Parliament for more than a month, but have no indication that this is something seriously under consideration by the President. That said, Kumaratunga's displeasure with the PM is obvious. She had hoped to leave a legacy as a pro-peace president, with the controversial tsunami aid agreement (known as the P-TOMS) with the

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Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as a hallmark of those efforts. That the PM's agreement with the Kumaratunga-baiting JVP repudiates these policies--and specifically vows to abnegate her cherished P-TOMS--must be especially unbearable to her. The contents of the still-unpublished manifesto should provide a good indication of which SLFP heavyweight prevails in this battle.

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